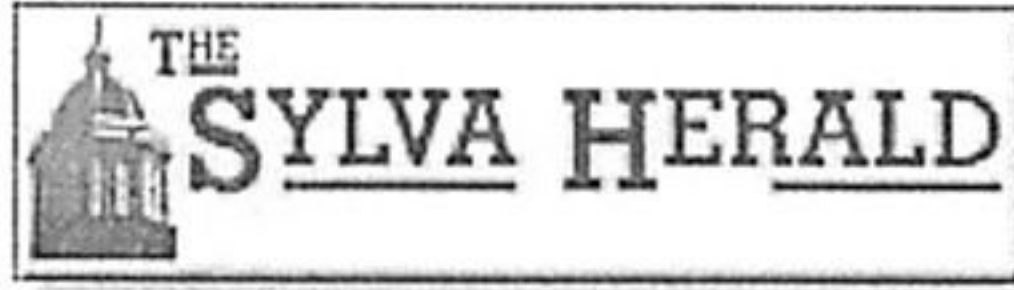


Alley  
reprint  
(6663)

<http://www.thesylvaherald.com/ruralite012303.htm>

copied 21 Dec 2008



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## Ruralite Cafe: Published 01/23/03

By Lynn Hotaling - Associate  
Editor

### Civil War mystery is set near Cashiers



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An Oconee County (S.C.) native whose roots are in Whiteside Cove has penned a novel that weaves family lore, history and conjecture into a story of a young girl's disappearance during the often violent aftermath of the Civil War.

Set in the shadow of Whiteside Mountain, "Presumed Dead" blends fact and fiction to produce what one critic has called a "haunting tale of (the author's) ancestors, whose peaceful lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina were abruptly shattered four months after the Civil War was supposed to have ended."

Retired airplane design engineer and first-time writer Howard Alley, great-nephew of legendary Judge Felix Alley, wrote the book for his children, he said.

"These stories came to us - word of mouth - from our father. When my brothers and I are gone, the stories will be gone," said Alley Tuesday from his Roswell, Ga., home. "I merged two stories that happened almost simultaneously after the Civil War."



Alley told me about his father's aunt, Cornelia Norton, who disappeared and was assumed to have been the victim of a wild animal attack.

"The official explanation was that she was killed by a panther," Alley said. "My dad died in 1971 still believing his aunt had been killed by a panther."

Cornelia's family didn't learn the truth until 1995 when Alley's cousins in Whiteside Cove received a letter from someone in Tennessee who said their grandmother was Cornelia Norton.

And Alley's second cousin, Frances Lombard Edwards, who lives in the house Col. John Alley (Howard's great-grandfather) built in 1857, was given a document that said Cornelia had "disappeared in the night," Howard Alley said.

I don't intend to give away the story, so that's all I'm going to say about Cornelia.

Paired with the mystery of the vanished girl is the true story of Col. John Alley's post-Civil War encounter with Col. George Kirk, who led a band of Union marauders on raids in and around Jackson County.

After Kirk's men had stolen all they could from Col. Alley's farm, they discovered Alley had fought for the Confederacy and demanded he swear an oath of allegiance to the Union.

When Alley refused, Kirk decreed he should be hung. Alley was spared only because one of Kirk's raiders had served under Alley during the Mexican War.

"The soldier cut the rope from my great-grandfather's neck," Alley said. "He told the others that the colonel had saved his life during the Mexican



War and now he would save the colonel's life."

An account of the encounter between Alley and Kirk is found in "The History of Jackson County."

"At the age of 80, Thomas Picklesimer, of Whiteside Cove, recalled how his grandfather, Col. John H. Alley, had had a terrible encounter with Kirk's raiders or at least persons who were associated with the group," wrote the late Kent Coward in the chapter titled "The Community in Crisis."

"They entered Whiteside Cove, took the colonel captive, and completely stripped his home of everything that could be carried away, including a blanket which was spread across children who were sick in the bed with measles. The group made off with their loot. Regaining his freedom, Col. Alley organized a group and pursued the raiders, catching them in Macon County and hanging three of them," Coward wrote.

Col. Alley's military service, both in the Civil War and the Mexican War, is documented in the Library of Congress, said Howard Alley.

The colonel served under Gen. Winfield Scott in the war with Mexico and during the removal of the Cherokee from the North Carolina mountains, Howard Alley said.

Col. Alley first visited Whiteside Cove as a young soldier in the 1830s. He stayed with Barak Norton, the cove's first white settler. Family legend has it that when Alley left, he teased Norton's daughter Sarah, age 10, that he would "have to wait for her to grow up so he could marry her," Howard Alley said.

A few years later, John Alley did just that, combining the Norton and Alley families and creating another of the many stories passed down to



descendants.

While Howard Alley did not know his great-grandfather, he learned the stories from his father, another John H. Alley, who was in his teens when the colonel died.

As he makes the rounds of book signings, Howard Alley said one thing that seems to intrigue audiences is meeting a descendant of someone who had an encounter with Col. Kirk and lived to tell the tale.

"Descendants of those who actually felt the wrath of Col. Kirk are few and far between," he said.

Luckily for devotees of historical fiction, Col. John Alley survived his encounter with Kirk, and Howard Alley's grandfather was born in 1867 and shared his father's stories with his son and grandson.

Here's what Fred Chappell, the Tar Heel State's poet laureate, had to say about Howard Alley's inaugural writing effort:

"An intricate murder mystery encloses a tender and romantic love story. Here is a tale firmly rooted in a special time and place that the author renders authentically and affectionately, never disregarding hardships and dangers. I enjoyed every scrap of it."

Copies of "Presumed Dead" are available at City Lights.

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